

How Long?

Isaiah 49:1-6, Luke 2:22-40 (ESV)

October 17, 2004

“There was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel,”—waiting for the consolation of Israel, waiting for the consolation of Israel—“and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.” How long would that take? “It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.” How long would he have to wait for the consolation of Israel? How long have you and I waited for salvation? How long are we willing to wait for redemption? How long are we to wait? How long?

We live in strange times. We live in a land of untold wealth, but we exist in an age of increasing insecurity. We are largely free to do as we please, but we are often not pleased with what we do. We are fiercely proud of our freedom of religion, but for many that means merely freedom from religion, freedom not to worship God at all, freedom not to be grateful, freedom not to be respectful, freedom to be dismissive of God. We know the name of Jesus Christ, but do we honor that as one name above all others, or do we dishonor that as only one among many? We have inherited from those who have gone before us a beautiful sanctuary for the worship of God, and yet, more seats are empty than filled. Where have all the people gone?

The times in which we live seem strange even to us, and yet, even that strangeness unites us with the rest of humanity across all time and places in our waiting, waiting for better times, waiting for the right time, waiting for consolation, waiting for salvation, waiting for redemption, waiting for God and for his Christ, either by name or not. How long are we to wait? How long?

Simeon “came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, ‘Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.’”

Here is good news! When Simeon saw the infant Jesus, the Holy Spirit worked within him so that he realized that his wait was over, that the long night of Israel had ended, that the day of salvation had dawned, that the light had risen, that

God has sent his Christ, and that the consolation of Israel had begun. Thanks be to God! No wonder he blessed God with a hymn which we shall sing after the sermon. But what a hymn! Simeon sang, in effect, that he could die happy having seen Jesus Christ.

All his life, Simeon had waited for the Christ. Now that the Christ had come he could depart in peace. His life was fulfilled in seeing and announcing the Christ, yes, seeing and announcing the Christ. That is to say, his was not a private experience. It was not just Simeon and Jesus. This was, instead, a highly public encounter. It was in the temple. It was at a time of worship. Simeon lifted up the child and lifted up his voice to proclaim salvation in Christ, quoting Isaiah 49 about the servant of the Lord. It could not have been lost on his hearers that his acknowledgment of salvation in Christ stood in direct opposition to the teachings of the Roman Empire that Caesar Augustus was savior. Simeon was making a radical, exclusive, dramatic profession of faith, expensive faith, dangerous faith, a challenging faith, an all-or-nothing faith. And yet, Simeon's wait was over. And because his wait was over, our wait is over. How long are we to wait? How long? No longer! No longer! The Christ has come, and his name is Jesus. Thanks be to God!

John Calvin, a pastor and theologian in Geneva in the 1500s, has made an interesting observation of this passage. If the sight of Christ as an infant was sufficient for Simeon to approach death cheerfully and confidently, he asks, how much more reason is there for us to live confidently and peacefully today, since we have seen not only the birth but also the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ?¹ We have seen all parts of our salvation complete in Christ. That gives us a tremendous advantage over Simeon and therefore an increased responsibility.

Simeon's faithful waiting for the consolation of Israel raises the implied question, "How long are we to wait?" How long are we to wait for salvation? For Simeon, the waiting was for a lifetime. And yet, before he died he saw the Christ. And so he died in peace with the blessing of God. And the implied question points us directly to the gospel answer that the salvation which Simeon saw was not just for himself but was also for the world, for Israel and for the Gentiles, and, yes, for you and for me. Because his wait is over, our wait is over. We do not need to wait any longer. We do not need to look to the future for any other salvation. Salvation

¹John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, vol. 1: *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke, Vol. I*, trans. A. W. Morrison (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 1:92.

has come. Redemption has come. Consolation has come. Christ has come. God has been glorified. The wait is over.

This was true for Simeon. This was true for Joseph and Mary. This was true for Luke. This was true for Theophilus, to whom Luke dedicated this gospel. And, yes, this is true for you and me. However long we have waited, however dark and cold the night has been, however lonely the watchfulness has been, however deep the depths we have plumbed, however far we have fallen, however strenuously we have run away, however grievous the sin we have committed, however blind and ungrateful we have been, however deadly our self-inflicted wounds, all of that has come to an end. Christ has come. Our waiting is over. Now we are living in the fullness of time.

No sooner had Simeon made his public announcement of Christ than he pulled Mary aside for a more private revelation, which we still get to hear: “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” That is to say, salvation is not cheap. The glory of God is not without cost. All that is not well with life cannot be made well by the simple say so of God. Instead, Christ paid the price of being opposed, hated, resented, accused, blamed, convicted, and crucified in order to bear away our sin and to reconcile us to God. No wonder some would rise and some would fall!

That is to say, some would believe and some would reject. Some would receive the reconciliation that was extended and some would persist in their brokenness. We should not be surprised even today by opposition to the gospel. The only question for us is, which will it be for us? Shall we rise by Christ, or shall we fall by Christ? In Jesus, do we see God’s Christ, or just another teacher? As we see Jesus, are we turned and drawn toward God, or are we turned away?² This is our defining moment. Nothing else in our lives is more important than this.

In case there is any hesitation, in case there is any more undue waiting, in case someone needs a little more convincing, Luke shares with us another witness, also. “Anna...did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.” At that very hour! At that very moment! At the very instant of their presentation of Jesus to the Lord, according to the Law of the Lord, this prophetess, Anna, gives her thanks to God and gives her testimony to all who would listen that Jesus was the Christ

²Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1990), 39.

bringing the redemption of Israel and so of the world. Luke has preserved this for us, so that it is as if we were there. This is her testimony to us. Shall we receive it or not?

In a few moments, three young adults will stand before this congregation to profess and reaffirm their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They have heard the good news. They have believed in Christ. They have responded in faith. They want to be part of this congregation of the people of God. And in their professions and reaffirmation they give to all of us the gift of the opportunity to reaffirm our own faith. Will we do that?

Two of these young adults, husband and wife, have come up to Richmond today, to this sanctuary, to present their infant son to the Lord, not according to the law of the Old Testament but according to the commandment of Christ in the New Testament, for the sacrament of baptism. Will old men sing and bless the Lord? Will prophetesses prophesy? Indeed, they already have! And we will all be invited to commit ourselves to helping these parents bring up this child in the love, nurture, and admonition of the Lord. Can we do that?

“There was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.” How long are we to wait? No longer! Our wait is over. For Simeon “came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God.” May God grant us the grace and faith to join him yet today in singing:

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org